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PRESERVATION

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY  
ON CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Samarkand, Uzbekistan

MRS. CLINTON: Thank you so much. Mr. President, you may be assured that I will carry your warm words and your kind invitation to my husband, who is quite sad that I have had the opportunity to come to Uzbekistan first. And I know that if there is any way possible, he will want, also, to come and see your beautiful country and I hope that will come to pass. I want to thank you and Mrs. Karimov for the very warm and gracious welcome and hospitality that I have received from you and from your people.

In the last two and a half days, I have met with professional and business women in Tashkent to talk about what nongovernmental organizations were doing. I have talked with university students in Tashkent and teenagers in Bukhara about their questions as they asked me in English with great confidence in their voices about what was going on in the United States and what I thought of them and their country.

I complimented them because I have met with students from all over the world -- and I say this not because I am here in Samarkand, I will say it when I return home -- I have never met with groups of young people, young men and young women who were better prepared and asked better questions than the ones I met in both Tashkent and Bukhara. I have also had the opportunity to visit your ancient monuments and I want to thank the people of Bukhara and Samarkand for opening these monuments for the entire world to appreciate.

I have been privileged to see the old and the new Uzbekistan. This morning, Mrs. Karimova and I visited a Jewish synagogue in Bukhara; and there, the Rabbi of that small and ancient congregation told me of the ways that you, Mr. President, and your government have restored religious freedom and encouraged religious and cultural tolerance. Mrs. Karimova explained to me that under the Soviet Communist regime, individuals and families were forbidden to exercise their religion, and even prohibited from practicing time-honored traditions surrounding the birth of a child, a marriage, or the loss of a loved one.

Thankfully those days are over. And in Uzbekistan today, people of all religions can worship freely and openly. And as we heard from our first speaker and from the President, the nationalities that are present in this one city alone represent the talents and abilities and aspirations of so many different traditions, all of whom are living peacefully in this cultural and religious heart of Central Asia.

I have come to Samarkand and Uzbekistan on behalf of my husband, President Clinton and the American people to reinforce the young but strong and growing ties between our two countries and to witness firsthand the important progress you are making as you move toward democracy, create a civil society, and build an economy that helps all citizens realize their own dreams. But I have come for another reason as well. I have come to learn from you -- to learn from you not only about your rich past and rich culture, but also about the deeply-rooted traditions of respect for religious and ethnic differences which have enabled this culture to flourish for so many generations.

In the last days, starting in Tashkent and traveling through Bukhara to here, I have been struck by the beauty of your places of worship. What has made the sharpest impression on me, however, is their proximity. Muslims, Christians and Jews following their faiths in the same neighborhoods. Perhaps even more remarkable is that they have done so for centuries.

This spirit of respect extends to all corners of your society. For millennia, people of different backgrounds have lived together peacefully, and they do so today. In the school I visited yesterday in Bukhara, there were children sitting in a circle, asking me questions -- Uzbeks, Tajiks and Russians. And the questions came fast as their curiosity raced ahead and they wanted to carry on this conversation for a very long time. I reluctantly had to leave, but I could see in that group of children the future of this great country. I know that the people of Uzbekistan have a long-standing commitment to knowledge and learning. After all, this is the country that invented algebra.

Now, when I was growing up as a young girl and studying algebra in school, I'm not sure I would have been grateful for the invention of algebra. But of course, the world advanced because of the scholarship that you had here. You are blessed by a great artistic and literary tradition. And your literacy rate is the envy of many countries. I recognize that these are demanding times as you build your new society and that the resources are scarce. But I hope you will protect your strong system of education for girls as well as boys, because I know from seeing the faces of the university students and the high school students that you have such great potential in the minds of your young people, and we know that a strong foundation of education is essential for building a thriving democracy.

Now, perhaps your record of finding strength in your diversity does not seem remarkable to you. As the President told me and repeated again here, he grew up in Samarkand. He perhaps took for granted the numbers of different people living together. But this tradition -- this diversity -- is rare. For if you look around the world today, you will see where differences, old and new, ethnic and religious, are used as a pretext for hatred, violence and inhumanity -- in Bosnia and Rwanda -- in Northern Ireland and in the Middle East. You will also see places where extremists

hijack holy traditions, not to lift people up closer to God, but to push them apart.

I imagine that the diversity of cultures represented by the caravans which plied the ancient silk road helped instill this tradition of respect that has armed you against these darker impulses. Travelers from China and Europe and India, Byzantium and the Arab world would sit and talk and drink tea together in the caravan-sarays -- an experience which could only deepen the bonds between individuals. After all, what does trade depend upon? To trade, you must live in an open society, free from walls and barriers.

Information, ideas, goods and people must be able to come in and go out. Trade is built on respect. To trade, you have to believe that someone -- someone who may be unlike yourself -- has something of worth to offer, and that you, by the same reasoning, have something of equal value to offer them in return. This basic transaction does more than spark commerce. It nurtures tolerance, a willingness to at least try to understand those whose race, heritage or religion might be different from our own.

This openness to ideas led the great philosophers of Islam to incorporate Western thought into their teachings in the medressas of Bukara and Samarkand in the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries. Their efforts literally preserved wisdom, like the work of Aristotle that would otherwise have been lost to the ages. This openness also made Uzbekistan a safe home for the world's oldest Jewish community outside the Middle East. It led to the growth of Nachbandi Sufism, now the largest strain of Sufism. Bukhara is the seat of that remarkable movement, which respects other traditions, while at the same time, rejecting extremism. I was very touched and honored when I met the Mullah at the mosque in Bukhara yesterday, when he expressed his hope that echoes that of the President that the relations between our two countries will grow deeper and stronger.

And I imagine this openness, which honors many religions, which accepts people from many different places, is one of the reasons that Samarkand and Bukhara have survived for more than 2000 years. Despite your great history, I would not be surprised if your people did not have concerns about the years that lie ahead, because while the architecture of communism lies in rubble, the hard work of building the new structures of freedom is just beginning. I know, based on the experience of my own country, which is now the oldest surviving democracy, building democracy is a never-ending task that requires the commitment of all citizens, generation after generation.

But from what I know of Uzbekistan and of the other countries of Central Asia that I have visited -- Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan -- I have every confidence that you will succeed, for it must have taken unimaginable courage and steadfastness to survive under the old order in a system whose goal it was to stifle difference and erase culture and religion, you held fast, even as the Iron Curtain cut through the Silk Road. Now that curtain has been torn down, and the Silk Road thrives again as you travel on your journey, not on camels but moving toward a new destination -- a democracy, and looking toward the future. Like the traders of old who risked their lives to travel the Silk Road to new lands and new opportunities, the work of democracy will take you, also, to risks for new opportunities as well.

I want you to know that democracy in my country and in yours depends not only on developing institutions that protect individuals and include all individuals from different backgrounds. It not only depends on holding free and fair elections, not once but time and time again, it depends not only on freedom of religion and freedom of expression, but it depends ultimately on whether democratic values live in the hearts and minds of all citizens. Nurturing these values, passing them down from generation to generation, is one of the most challenging tasks for any democracy, particularly a new emerging one like yours. But I am confident that the tradition of respect and tolerance that has stood this land so well for so many generations better prepares you to face the challenges that lie ahead.

In a few short years, the bonds between our countries have grown strong and I trust that they will grow even stronger. We have so much to learn from each other, and you have much to teach the world about finding strength in diversity. For centuries, that ancient Silk Road took the people of Central Asia to new worlds rich in commerce and culture. Today you are travelling this road again, only this time in a different direction -- toward new worlds of freedom and democracy. Though the journey is hard and the horizon may at times seem distant, I hope you will take faith from the fact that the President and people of the United States will walk with you every step of the way. We are proud to be your friend and your partner on this journey to democracy. Thank you very much. (Applause.)

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